

Olivia Mist

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LAST week I chanced to read in a Cincinnati paper that Mrs.—well, it does not matter about her present name; she was Olivia Mist when I knew her—had "thrown open the spacious saloons of her large and handsome residence" to an audience who listened while an eminent English author discoursed about Post-impressionism, Cubism, the gasping school in poetry, the Russian novel, with a side glance at Ernest Dowson, Aubrey Beardsley, and others of the eighteen-nineties. I was interested by this announcement, but hardly surprised. Still, I permitted myself a little sardonic smile at Olivia, out there in her "spacious saloons," and this, when you have read my account, you will agree I had a perfect right to do.

I have a passion for places which have a "season" out of the season. There, if anywhere, you touch romance and you see ghosts. You see all the history of a crowd that has vanished and the fate of a crowd that has not yet arrived. You stroll through the empty casino, and come upon a lady's glove, a faded flower, a torn dance-card, an odd playing-card, a bill of fare, a concert program, left there to be swept away to the dust-heap. Signs and announcements, meant for crowds on the beach or promenade, or on the alley-walk leading to the spring, stare blindly and impotently at the solitary passenger. In front of the theater the placard of a troupe of actors who came and vanished two months ago is lashed by the dreary winter rain. All the places which are so much sought after, which cost immense sums to reach in the season, are now wide open to the pensive stroller. He can now lounge in the paddock of the race-course for hours if he wishes, undisturbed by anything but the wind howling round the grand stand; and on some day when the

caretaker is airing the theater, he can seat himself comfortably in the principal box and watch the ghosts of old actors perform fantastically.

I have always had this passion; I have it now; and if my shade inhabits anywhere, it will doubtless be at some San Sebastian or Trouville or Atlantic City—though I hope not Atlantic City—out of the season. In the middle of the eighteen-nineties, when I was still what may be called a youth, this passion of mine already burned with a "hard gem-like flame," and I carefully tended it. So it was that I was led to Mont Dore, in the Puy-de-Dôme, at the end of October, when everybody had gone, and the Hotel Sarciron was on the point of closing. I settled down to stay as long as the hotel people were disposed to keep me—to maintain a chef, a head-waiter, a page, and three or four chambermaids all for my benefit.

As a matter of fact, I was very little in the hotel. I went to hotels from a timidity in dealing with life, and a kind of helplessness in solving problems of residence, arising from the tradition that if you arrived at a place where you were unknown, you ought to make at once for the leading hotel. I had been taught that in any place below the leading hotel you were likely to be robbed, or poisoned by bad food, or catch infectious diseases. But there was always some feeling of shame inside me as I entered the safe portals of the large hotel, as if I had condescended to a degrading compromise, because the large hotel somewhat conflicted with the artistic scheme of life then pursued. That postulated the tavern and the café as the only possible habitat for the true artist when on his travels; just as it postulated, as the only possible alternative to the society of

artists, the society of circus-people, and failing them, of tramps and even of criminals. It also postulated a mistress, another piece of artistic baggage in which I was shamefully lacking. Many of the artists I admired resided, from choice rather than from necessity, in some sunless, rat-ridden house in a narrow, smelly street; and after I had climbed innumerable stairs, meeting with a fresh smell on every landing, I used to gaze uneasily at those I had come to visit, apprehensive lest at any moment they should tumble down at my feet, felled by some dread malady arising from unsanitary dwelling. They, on the other hand, I felt, regarded me with some disdain as one who, dwelling amid the gilt and marble of the modern hotel, could not possibly do anything worth while. Remember, I speak of the eighteen-nineties. Nowadays it is the other way about. But at that time this feeling was very rigid. If poets or painters had relatives—mothers or aunts or suchlike—who lived in opulent conditions, they did their best to conceal them. It almost labeled a man as an amateur at once if it came out that his uncle had a country estate or that his aunt was the wife of a wealthy lawyer.

In the same way there was only one excuse for living in luxurious quarters, and that was to be in debt. There was something daredevil and Balzacian about that which tended to enhance a man's artistic qualities. But at a hotel you cannot very well be in debt; they won't allow it. Very well then.

So I generally shunned the hotel I happened to be staying at except to swallow occasional sullen meals there and to go to bed. In a city, if any prepossessing lady happened to be stepping out of the hotel at the same time that I was, I would walk as close to her as I could, so that any of my friends who might be passing would take the impression that I had been in there reveling, and I would thus find grace in their sight. But no prepossessing lady, no lady at all, in fact, seemed to be in the hotel at Mont Dore when I arrived there. And none of my acquaintance, ar-

tistic or other, was likely to be in Mont Dore at the end of October.

Nevertheless, I sought out a café in which to spend most of my waking hours. I found one up a little street, paved with cobbles, which ended in a stable for cattle. Grass grew between the cobbles, and the afternoon sun used to fall very sweetly in the quiet place. There were about four tables in the little café, and the floor was sanded. I usually had it entirely to myself; the owners were elsewhere about their business. In fine weather the door stood wide open. Occasionally some farm-hand from the mountains would come in, bid me good day, go to the counter, and after drinking off a glass of wine that he had poured from one of the bottles, put down the price, and go his way. As the sunlight stole across the floor, and touched the old gray cat dozing in a chair and the geraniums in pots in the windows, a tinkle of bells would be heard, and the cows coming down from the mountains would go by, driven by a barefoot girl holding a long stick. Now and then one of the cows would stop and put her moist nose round the door, and give me a half-friendly look from her wide, distrustful eyes. The chickens, too, which on and off all day were seeking treasure between the cobbles, would sometimes venture over the threshold and stroll across the floor. I had orders from the goodwife to drive them out, but it was too much trouble. Oh, place divine! Give me to live, to dream away my days, in that or a like quiet place! Grant me this, and all the fame and notoriety in the world anybody else can have for me.

The sun-shadows would turn yellow and gold, and then die on the floor. The clock in the corner, after incredible wheezing, would clasp out five o'clock. The cat would rise, stretch herself back and forth, and walk off daintily. And I too would put the finishing touches on a poem called, perhaps, "City Fever," and take myself peacefully back to the hotel, pausing now and then to watch the shadows muffling the mountain-tops. But it was another iron rule in my school of art not



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to take poetical inspiration from rural scenes or vegetables, or from anything, in fact, which had not been touched to a different beauty by artifice.

One afternoon, seated thus placidly in the little café, listening to the bells softly tinkling as the cows and the goats came home, I was aroused by a most unexpected occurrence. A young lady of the foreign-tourist type—quite the last kind of person I should have expected to see there—rushed into the room, and stood panting and terrified in the middle of the floor.

"*Vauche!*" she shouted. "*Ally-von-song.*" She glared at me imperiously. "*Comprenny-vooo?*"

"Perfectly," I replied as I rose. "What is it you want done?"

"Oh, you speak English?" Considerable relief was in her face. "I 'm really glad. I speak English myself."

Her accent, however, was decidedly American.

"Those cows," she went on hurriedly, "are coming up the street. They 're quite wild. They 're as dangerous as they can be. Can't you send for the police?"

I assured her that the cows were quiet. Even as I spoke, the cow that was accustomed to say how d' ye do to me put her head in at the door. Immediately the girl shrieked.

"Quiet! It 's a mad bull!"

I shooed at the cow, which regarded me with pained astonishment at this exhibition of bad manners. Thereupon the little cow-driver came along and hit her a resounding thwack on her flank with the long stick. For an instant the cow gazed at me in deep reproach, and then moved slowly on, with less faith in humankind than ever.

"It 's an outrage," said the young lady. "The law would not allow it anywhere else but in France. Why, in America if a cow did *that*—"

Words failed her. She was now recovering her poise, and felt it was time to give an eye to her dignity.

"I am not afraid of *quiet* cows," she said deliberately; "but all French cows are mad, like most of the people."

Then she asked me the shortest way to the Hotel Sarciron.

"I am going there myself," I said, gathering up the leaves of a story I was trying to write about a worn sinner who lived in a tower beside a graveyard.

Before we had gone far, a voice called "Olivia!" and we saw a white-haired and extremely dry-looking lady standing in the door of a hardware shop across the street beside the amiable proprietor, who smiled widely and made reassuring signs to us.

"Why, Olivia Mist," repeated the lady, querulously, "wherever did you get to? I 've been just frightened to death."

"That 's my aunt," said Olivia. "When we saw the cows coming we ran in different directions. I 'm glad she 's safe."

At dinner that evening the head-waiter, imagining that with only ourselves in the hotel three compatriots would like to be friendly, had placed my table near that of Miss Mist and her aunt. We met, however, as perfect strangers. I do not know whether Olivia desired to talk to me or not; but I at least had no idea of allowing my reveries about the haggard sinner in the tower to be disturbed by the gabble of females. Except for some objection that Olivia made to the head-waiter about one of the dishes,—a rather lengthy objection which at one point seemed like brightening into a row,—the meal proceeded in silence. They left the dining-room first, and I could hear Olivia's voice at the other side of the hotel shouting at her deaf aunt. The word "cow" came to me very clearly.

Later I was obliged to go into the reading-room. It was the inevitable reading-room of a French hotel, one of those rooms which seem to be never aired, with an atmosphere as special as a church, and furnished with fragile plush-and-gilt chairs and a huge table covered with a great number of newspapers devoid of interest. There I found them both again, looking, as it seemed to me, a little forlorn. The aunt was sewing; Olivia was reading a copy of a Paris New York paper several days old. Two Tauchnitz

volumes were on the table beside her. I felt that in common decency I must speak. I asked her if she felt any ill effects from her panic that afternoon.

Americans are popularly supposed to be sociable and easy of access. In this respect they are sometimes compared favorably with the English. My experience, however, leads me to doubt whether this characteristic is uppermost when they fall in with their own countrypeople in foreign parts. They seem to be afraid that one does not know their precise importance, or that one does. Here we were, the only foreigners in a small town, thrown together in the same hotel, yet we chose to address each other with extreme stiffness and even with an undertone of hostility. Not the aunt, poor dear,—her infirmity prevented anything like social intercourse,—but if the head-waiter, who spoke very fair English, happened to overhear Miss Mist and me, he must have come to the conclusion that there was some hidden cause of rancor between us.

They had come to Mont Dore so that her aunt could take the waters. Why they had come so late in the season she did not explain. I believe that the place she first encountered me had something to do with the frigidity of her address. She was by no means sure that I was a fit person to unbend to. Before long she inquired shamelessly what my business was. I replied with some consequence that I was an author. In those days a few rags of hierarchy still fluttered about this profession.

"And are you on a holiday?" pursued Miss Mist.

"Holiday? Nothing of the kind."

"Oh," she said detachedly, "I thought, seeing where you were this afternoon—I guess you don't do much work here."

"On the contrary," I replied with some heat. Although I thoroughly despised her, I thought it worth while to explain my theory of places to work in. She listened with a most irritating smile of pity and contempt.

"I guess it is only bums and loafers," she said at last, "who hang about saloons.

It's pretty much the same in all countries, believe me. You won't find great writers—the really important, I mean—in such places." She took up one of the Tauchnitz volumes. "You would n't be likely to find William Black or Mrs. Henry Wood or E. P. Roe in a saloon."

Although I wanted to get away, I would at that time have started a dispute with St. Paul himself if he had put forward these names as masters of literature.

"I dare say," I said with utter disdain; "but how can anything be inferred from what such people do? They are not artists."

She stared at me.

"No, of course not. I guess you don't know much. They are authors."

"Yes," I replied dryly; "that is just where it is."

"However did you get it into your head," she continued, "that Mrs. Henry Wood and William Black were painters? Do you know any of the great authors? Do you know Conan Doyle or Mrs. Humphry Ward or Marie Corelli?"

I answered briefly that I did not. Inside me I felt rather ashamed that I had to deny all acquaintance with these lights of English literature. By way of getting the balance a little more even, I informed her rather pompously that I had seen Max Beerbohm in the High at Oxford.

"Who is he?" asked Olivia. "I've never heard of him."

I mentioned Arthur Symonds, Aubrey Beardsley, Ernest Dowson. I also mentioned the "Yellow Book." At this last a gleam of intelligence came into her face.

"Oh, yes, that's the thing all the papers in England and New York laugh at. I've seen that name; I've seen jokes about it. It must be a pretty mean little affair. I don't think," she added with a tight smile, "that any of the great authors would write for that, would they?"

I could not honestly say that they would, for this was in the good period of the "Yellow Book"—the Beardsley period. Instead, I observed that there might be different opinions about the great authors.

"Well," she drawled, "you don't seem to know them, anyway. Come on, Aunt; it's bedtime."

After that I avoided her for a few days. I persuaded the head-waiter to put my table at the other end of the room; and across the wide space Miss Mist and I self-consciously ignored each other. Then one afternoon I met her face to face in the hotel entrance as she was coming out and I was going in.

"Well," she said, "have you been at the saloon again?"

Although she neither liked nor approved of me, it was evident from this that she had given me some thought. I answered gruffly that I had.

"In America," she said, "there are millions of young men who never put their foot in a saloon and are leading perfectly pure lives—"

"And reading E. P. Roe," I put in morosely.

She colored, and looked at me with a little surprise, a little uncertainty, too, I thought.

"Now, who do *you* call a great living novelist, I wonder."

Her tone was mocking and condescending, intended to convey that no wisdom could possibly come from such a silly young ass as I; but underneath it I perceived a real curiosity.

"Well," I said slowly, "there are George Meredith, Thomas Hardy, Henry James—"

"Wait a minute." She took a silver pencil from her belt and wrote these names down inside the cover of her Tauchnitz volume. "I may look at their books some time," she said, "just to see what your opinion is worth."

A few days later I missed them at lunch, and was told they had gone to Paris.

It must have been quite two years afterward that I was taken, on one of those June days when London is the most beautiful city in the world, to lunch at a ladies' club somewhere in the neighborhood of Berkeley Square, I think. When

we entered the dining-room, my friend stopped to talk to an acquaintance at a table where there was a large luncheon party. I have an excellent memory for faces, and I found myself looking with some attention at another of the guests. Where had I seen that face before? Then the little gray town of Mont Dore, basked in the harsh Auvergne Mountains, with the large empty hotel at the end of the season, suddenly came back to me. It was—surely it must be Olivia Mist! But how changed! So changed that there was every excuse for my failure at first to recognize her. Instead of a very dowdy girl whose good looks were killed by ugly clothes made in some small American town, and by particularly repellent provincial manners, she might now really and truly be called the pink of fashion in all the force of that phrase. She was dressed very well indeed, and looked extremely pretty, even handsome. She was evidently very much at her ease, and appeared as if she was enjoying life. I believe she knew me from the first; she glanced at me quickly once or twice. Finally she decided to recognize me.

"How do you do?" she said. "Did n't I see you at Mont Dore when my aunt was taking the waters there?"

I replied that she did, and added that we had had some conversations upon literary topics.

"Here is a man," said Olivia, blandly, turning to her neighbor, a very well-known actress, "who had never heard of George Meredith till I told him."

At this point my friend moved on to our own table, and I bowed to Olivia without another word. I could hardly have spoken: I was too flabbergasted. My friend mentioned to me the names of some of those in Olivia's party. They were rather a celebrated lot, the kind of people whose names are wont to be seen in the newspapers.

Afterward in the smoking-room, as I was standing alone while my friend was writing a note, Olivia, from the far side of the room, where she was sitting with another lady and a man, beckoned to me,



“ It was—surely it must be Olivia Mist! But how changed! ”

and I went over to her. There was considerably more graciousness in her manner to me now than there had been a little while ago; perhaps she was reassured by the name of the member I had come in with.

"We have just been this morning to an exhibition of Max Beerbohm's caricatures. They are awfully interesting. Do you know about him?"

"No," I said. "Not in the least."

Olivia exclaimed.

"Oh, but you *ought* to. You are quite behind the times not to. So awfully interesting."

She proceeded to give me her views on the arts. She had covered a good deal of ground since the Mont Dore days, but I was no more abreast of her now than I had been then. She had reached John Lane, so to speak, while I was at Leonard Smithers. For the "Yellow Book" in the post-Beardsley period she had praise, but the "Savoy," she thought, should be suppressed by the police, for all the world like those cows at Mont Dore. The gentleman who was sitting there agreed with her. She no longer spoke of William Black and Mrs. Henry Wood. For them she substituted George Meredith and Mrs. Craigie. She asked me if I had read "Tess of the D'Urbervilles."

"I have not," I replied. "The only novelist I can stick is E. P. Roe."

Olivia uttered a cry of horror.

"That quaint American person! You must know that we never mention him even at home. He is not a bit of an artist."

I wondered how far she had really got, and just how much she was able and willing to stand.

"Do you know Hubert Crackanthorpe's stories?" I asked casually.

"Crackanthorpe?" she repeated. She

paused, and then said, "I *seem* to know him."

"Do let me lend you his book," I urged.

And I sent it to her hotel that same afternoon.

THAT settled it. A few days later the Crackanthorpe volume came back with an acidulous little note. I forget now the contents of the note, and I am sorry I do. I can only recall the final sentence, which was to the effect that Crackanthorpe's book was a book no gentleman would write and no gentleman approve of, and that it could have no circulation in the society of real ladies and gentlemen. It was a very scathing note indeed.

Since I read the notice in the Cincinnati paper a few days ago, I have been tempted to send her the Crackanthorpe volume again. She has got to him by now. But, alas! I, too, have moved. I am nearer to William Black and Mrs. Henry Wood than I was then; I can even toy with E. P. Roe. Olivia is far more advanced and modern than I am at present. She would force on me new painters and poets and prose writers who do not interest me at all, who, in fact, give me the creeps far worse than E. P. Roe used to do. She would hurl at me people who may perhaps some day be great geniuses, but who are in the meantime pretentious and tiresome. But even if they be authentic geniuses, I have no desire to add to my stock of geniuses. What is the use? Beardsley is a good enough artist for me, Symons a good enough critic, Dowson a good enough poet, Crackanthorpe a good enough tale-teller. To the persuasions and incantations of Olivia I could reply only as the pagans in St. Augustine's time used to reply to the Christians: "Why trouble? Why follow us about? We don't want to be saved."

